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Researching Intimacies and New Media

Methodological Opportunities and Challenges

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Abstract

Researching intimacies and new media encompasses a wide variety of intersecting practices and relationships. This special issue presents contributions from researchers who are investigating practices of intimacy mediated either wholly or in part through new media in which a variety of different methodological opportunities and challenges are highlighted and discussed. Existing research has addressed different combinations of new media, intimacy, and methodology, but there remains space for a dedicated focus on the ways in which these areas are interrelated and entangled. The articles in this special issue build up a conversation around this particular intersection from a range of directions, from reflections on specific technological devices/apps and their promotion of particular forms of intimacies that may lead to (dis)comfort and (dis)connection, to the intimate—and sometimes risky—investments in research processes and fieldwork, as well as the ethical frameworks and decision-making processes guiding the research.

Keywords

intimacy, new media, mediated intimacies, online/internet methodologies

Introduction

Researching intimacies encompasses a wide variety of practices, topics and relationalities, such as kinship, sexual encounters, body and gender, dis/abilities, migration, friendship, birth and death, romantic relationships, nonmonogamies, dating, or community formation. Each of these finds different forms in its mediatisation. Simultaneously “new media” comprises a variety of digital platforms that offer distinctive ways to share, connect, and communicate; differences in hardware and software intersect with situated sociocultural norms about technology use.

This special issue zooms in on issues of *methodology* and *method* in relation to researching *new media* and *intimacies*. Investigating practices of intimacy, as they are mediated/facilitated by new media poses particular methodological challenges for researchers and deserves closer attention. For example, national guidelines vary widely on how to handle data, or when ethical approval for research is required. The unstable or ephemeral nature of many online interactions creates logistical and technical challenges in capturing data. Meanwhile, researching intimate practices online can be simultaneously an intimate and lonely process for a researcher. We may have our deepest assumptions and expectations challenged, or our personal boundaries blurred in our digitally mediated encounters with participants. The combination of intimacies and new media thus poses

challenges to existing methodological paradigms due to the limitations/affordances of the medium intersecting with continuously shifting practices and understandings of intimacy. The contributions to this special issue discuss a number of these issues, while presenting a range of intimacies as well as a selection of digital sites and apps. In so doing, a variety of different methodological opportunities and challenges are highlighted and discussed.

In what follows, we set the scene for the creation of this special issue, and outline the existing body of scholarship to which this volume contributes, before introducing the individual contributions. In the closing section, we lift up the motif of opportunities and challenges to address an underlying tension between a perceived need for methodological stability and the instability of these particular fields.

Setting the Scene

The initial inspiration for this special issue came from listening to stories told by the members of our shared

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project team about doing fieldwork and collecting and analyzing data. We are both part of a six-person, Danish Council for Independent Research-funded project called *New Media—New Intimacies (NewMI)* (2015-2018; newmi.ruc.dk/index_uk.html), in which each of us is engaged in researching different practices of intimacy on/with/through/as new media.

As the members of our research group are all based at different universities in Denmark and Sweden, but we all live close to Copenhagen, rather than meeting at our university workplaces we have met at home, taking it in turns to host our project meetings and share meals together. Apart from resolving a practical issue, this created an intimate space for vivid discussions that from very early on in our project felt mutually supportive and safe. It is in the intimacy of these meetings, with project talk interspersed with each other's lives, that stories of fieldwork and data collection successes, hurdles, and surprises have also been shared. Perhaps because we were separated from the institutional surroundings of the university, this space felt particularly informal and friendly. Meeting in each other's homes allowed us to become intimate as a group by developing ideas (for instance, for this special issue) and by discussing research in an environment marked by personalized generosity, which would not have been possible in the same way if we had had the meetings in our offices. Our own experience has shown us that intimacy can be a fruitful capacity when working collaboratively, a reflection that resonates with several contributions in this special issue which focus on intimate relations with participants or research colleagues.

Our discussions in these meetings sparked many reflections, such as how intimacy as a concept has become porous (and therefore hard to define and to detect), further problematized by multiple understandings of intimacies (see, for example, Berlant, 2000; Giddens, 1992; Jamieson, 1998; Plummer, 2003). We also considered how the process of collecting and sorting data becomes a daunting and unmanageable task, because of the ceaseless flow of information online, or the sudden dis/appearance of participants, or because challenges of transparency in our data, and our roles as researchers, became too overwhelming due to the multitude of platforms and programs. Whatever the case, in one way or another, many of our discussions were related to questions about concepts and methods falling short and challenges connected to rethinking and reworking methods to capture the broad dynamics of media spaces and intimacies in flux. So it became obvious that what is at stake when delving into the intersecting areas of new media and intimacy is linked inextricably to methodological challenges—and the opportunities that emerge from being pushed to find solutions to these challenges. Hence, our initial interest in methodology and methods in relation to our own research comes not from

positions of confidence (about the precise and accurate ways of applying/creating methods), but rather from being unsettled with the perplexing and confounding ways in which method plays a part.

The enthusiastic response to our call for papers for this special issue showed that there is a wide applicability and interest in bringing together questions about methodology and method when it comes to new media and intimacy, suggesting that our own sense of unsettlement resonated with larger debates and audiences. Indeed, although existing research has addressed different combinations of the three themes of methodologies, new media and intimacies, our own struggles showed that there was a need for scholarship that brings all three together in an in-depth discussion.

Existing Scholarship

A rich vein of scholarship about Internet culture exists that dates back to the early 1990s, which has produced several important volumes concerning online methodologies (e.g., Hine, 2000, 2015; Kozinets, 2015; Markham & Baym, 2009). More recently, research specifically focused on new media (characterized by user-generated content, interactivity, participation and community formation) has gained much attention (e.g., Ellison & boyd, 2007; Mandiberg, 2012; van Dijck, 2013). While this body of work has engaged with methods and methodologies related to researching new media, there remains a lacuna in the scholarship when it comes to specifically researching *practices of intimacy* in/on/through/with new media.

Meanwhile, intimacy, affectivity, and emotions have become increasingly popular fields of study in their own right (e.g., Ahmed, 2004, 2010; Berlant, 2000, 2008; Clough & Halley, 2007; Cvetkovich, 2003; Jamieson, 1998; Massumi, 2002). As part of this burgeoning field, the particular methodological challenges of dealing with intimate situations in research, or how best to research particular affects, or how to include the personal have also been discussed (e.g., Fraser & Puwar, 2008; Pink, 2009; Stage & Knudsen, 2015). This body of work has highlighted the methodological challenges and opportunities for researching practices of intimacy generally, but lacks specific focus on the methodological challenges related to intimacies as they occur in/with *new media*.

Finally, the last few years has seen the publication of several important texts dealing with the relationship between new media and affect (e.g., Chambers, 2013; Garde-Hansen & Gorton, 2013; Hillis, Paasonen, & Petit, 2015; Hjorth & Lim, 2012; Karatzogianni & Kuntsman, 2012; McGlotten, 2013; McLelland, 2016; Paasonen, 2011; Payne, 2014; van Dijck, 2013). These volumes showcase a number of innovative theoretical attempts to think together new media and affect/emotion/intimacies,

often drawing on empirical case studies. This body of work has made important progress in thinking about new media and affect as co-constitutive; however, in researching these specific intersections of new media and intimacies *methodological issues* receive limited discussion.

In conclusion, there remains a need for work that zooms in on questions of method and methodology as they are experienced by researchers working at the cutting-edge of scholarship on intimacies and new media. In light of the increasing commercialization of intimacy online, transnational flows of information and gaps in institutional review board knowledge, there is a pressing need to share knowledge and experiences from the field, as well as proposing innovative methodological solutions and ideas on how to enter, survive, and exit these highly charged field sites. The scholarship above has been essential in guiding our own research in these fields (and, as evidenced by the popularity of many of these texts in the bibliographies of the articles featured in this special issue, has also influenced the work of the authors gathered here). However, we believe that there remains space for a dedicated focus on the ways in which new media, intimacies, and methodologies are interrelated and entangled. Planning our own research projects made us delve into the existing scholarship in a hunt for methodological guidance. Editing this special issue has been our way to contribute to building up a discussion around this particular intersection, and the contributions included here show just how wide an audience there might be for this.

Contributions

We are pleased to include here contributions from a range of countries and disciplinary contexts, which discuss a good variety of empirical materials. As a result of this spread, the articles are not easily grouped into particular clusters, but rather are quite distinctive and each brings something different to the whole. There is, however, a tendency toward coauthored papers and interdisciplinary approaches, which perhaps resonates with the perceived need for methodological innovation when researching new media and intimacies.

The special issue opens with “‘Fuck off to the tampon bible’: Misrecognition and Researcher Intimacy in an Online Mapping of ‘Lad Culture’” in which Adrienne Evans and Silvia Diaz-Fernandez explore their own engagement with lad culture through investigating the popular online platforms UniLad and The Lad Bible. Contextualizing these platforms within a larger framework of networked misogyny and sexism, they engage with a methodology of misrecognition as a way of understanding and challenging their own intimate experiences of (dis)connecting with their site of research.

In the next article, “Faraway, So Close: Seeing the Intimacy in Goodreads Reviews,” Beth Driscoll and DeNel Rehberg Sedo look into the digital site of Goodreads as a new force in contemporary book culture where people come to share their intimate reading experiences through book reviews. The authors employ two methods, thematic content analysis, a close reading of the reviews, and sentiment analysis, an automated “distant reading” process. Together the methods pave the way for meticulous analytical details, demonstrating that Goodreads reviews present distinctive, intimate reading practices, which also create social and emotional connections among readers and their books.

In “The Affective Circle of Harassment and Enchantment: Reflections on the ÖURA Ring as an Intimate Research Device,” Tarja Salmela, Anu Valtonen, and Deborah Lupton reflect on an attempt to research the ÖURA Ring, a wearable sleep-tracking device developed by a Finnish company. Through detailing the ups and downs of this auto-ethnographic study, they identify different forms of intimacy criss-crossing between the bodily norms of academia and the privacy of the sleeping body while contributing to the burgeoning scholarship on self-tracking devices.

In “Notes on Technology Devices in Research: Negotiating Field Boundaries and Relationships,” Henry Mainsah and Lin Prøitz use memory work to think back on moments in the field where the affordances of mobile phones and social networking site, Facebook, devices brought their “disparate worlds into close proximity” causing moments of disruption during two studies of young people in Norway. Through a reflection on their own emotional labor required to manage these blurred boundaries, they highlight the affective energy involved for researchers in negotiating these complex forms of intimacy with participants.

In “Researching LGBT+ youth intimacies and social media: The strengths and limitations of participant-led visual methods,” Kate Marston shares details of an innovative participant-led methodology which she developed to understand how young lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT)+ people in the United Kingdom used social media to connect and find positive role models. As she leads us through the research process, we gain not only a sense of the participants’ practices of intimacy performed through Tumblr and YouTube, but also the researcher’s own shifting intimacy with the participants as they meet, talk, and occasionally retreat behind their smart phones.

In “Situating Ethics in Online Mourning Research: A Scoping Review of Empirical Studies,” David Myles, Maria Cherba, and Florence Millerand provide a clear and detailed overview of the available scholarship concerning online mourning. A small, but fast-growing, field of

scholarship, online mourning practices raise a number of questions and emotions for researchers. This article not only highlights the field itself but also exemplifies the shortcomings in the current ethical guidance on researching intimate practices.

In “Intimacy, cosmopolitanism and digital media: A research manifesto,” Alex Lambert tackles the “ambiguous” qualities of intimacy through a critical reading of the philosophy of Peter Sloterdijk that brings intimacy and cosmopolitanism into dialogue. Focusing on the boundary between inside and outside, the tension between the multicultural and the safe space, he draws attention to the urgency of theorizing intimacy and new media in light of the “cultural, political and technological issues that place limits on a person’s desire to navigate flights through the rhizome.”

In “The Politics of Grey Data: Digital Methods, Intimate Proximity, and Research Ethics for Work on the ‘Alt-Right,’” Nathan Rambukkana raises the question of researcher safety when in intimate proximity to hostile research participants. The case of the “Alt-Right” movement is used here to highlight some of the challenges and strategies connected to the use of gray data and how to balance these with a social justice agenda.

The articles in this special issue approach the theme of opportunities and challenges in researching intimacies and new media from a range of directions. Some focus in on the technological devices that promote “a sense of privacy and interiority” (Albury & Byron, 2016, p. 7) detailing the almost prosthetic nature of smart phones for many today or the (un)comfortable intimacy of increasingly popular self-tracking devices (see articles by Mainsah & Prøitz, and Salmela et al., respectively). Others consider the challenges and opportunities involved in studying what are often considered to be intimate practices (sharing personal, emotional responses to a book [Driscoll & Rehberg Sedo] or expressing one’s sexual identity [Marston]). Others invite us to reflect on the intimacies of the research process itself (the support of a fellow researcher [Díaz-Fernández & Evans]), and the discomfort or risk of exposure when participants are hostile (Rambukkana). And, finally, there are those who point out the need for developing and reflecting on ethical frameworks to guide our research (Myles et al.) and handle questions of vulnerability and alterity (Lambert). The field of intimacies and new media is in flux, with limited institutional guidelines and no standard best practice in terms of methods or methodologies. This in itself—while disconcerting—creates a space for experimentation, and in opening up their research practices to us, the authors featured here allow us a glimpse at the cutting-edge experiments taking place to address the challenges of the field. In grappling with the challenges of flux, temporariness, dis/comforts and other tensions, the papers reveal creative opportunities to develop methods,

from introducing new theoretical frameworks as thinking tools, to developing hands-on ways of eliciting research materials.

Closing Thoughts: Opportunities and Challenges

A central aspect of doing qualitative research is being able to account for the inconsistencies in our fields, and the methods of which we make use. The articles collected in this special issue show that this is a challenge with which researchers working in the intersections of new media and intimacies grapple regularly. Not only do they have the task of adjusting and developing methods to access fields that are driven by momentariness, whether it be affective or technological, but they also have to figure out ways to make sense of how and why they chose these methods, and were these, in fact, methods at all?

As outlined earlier, the scholarly attention given to methodology and new media has produced useful criticism of how and why it can be problematic to translate and apply existing methods to new media spaces (e.g., Hine, 2000; Markham, 2013). There have also been extensive discussions about the unstable nature of researching the relations between new media and intimacy (e.g., Chambers, 2013; Hillis et al., 2015; Stage & Knudsen, 2015). What we did not highlight in our earlier review of the field is the conspicuously paradoxical character of searching for and insisting on the presence of methodological solidity when the combination of fields of inquiry repeatedly rejects stabilization.

To some extent, this tension has been dealt with on a theoretical level. Cutting-edge posthumanist media theorists, for example, suggest that we need to elevate our thinking by contesting prevailing understandings of media as something separate from us as humans (e.g., Paasonen, 2011, 2014; Sundén, 2012, 2015) or as entities that can be grasped (and researched) as isolated objects. Consequently, we are encouraged to let go of the idea that there is such a thing as “new” media. Instead we should develop ways to understand the processes of mediation that may have become more intensified, entangled and more intimate, but, none the less, are not “new” (see Kember & Zylinska, 2014, for a more elaborate unfolding of this argument).

In the recent anthology, *Mediated Intimacies. Connectivities, Relationalities and Proximities*, this premise is developed as one of the main theoretical lines of thought, in which the broad conceptualization of *processes* of mediation supports the idea that intensifications of intimacy occur on several levels as an extension of our embodied entanglements with media (Andreassen, Nebeling Petersen, Harrison, & Raun, 2017). We see this premise as meaningfully mirroring the vast landscapes of pervasive and enmeshed media objects, genres, and uses

as temporary materializations of bigger processes of mediation, as well as reflecting the constant intimate crossings of human and nonhuman entities. However, we also want to recognize how this reconceptualization leads, at least from a methodological point of view, to new opportunities and challenges.

We might benefit from developing more complex theoretical frameworks and thinking about media as (messy) processes of mediation, but often our methodological sense-making builds on a promise of precision that might make us actually conduct our research in rather static ways. Methodology always seems to become a process of “tidying up” and putting things in the “right order” and, as a result, media are still almost always presented and thought of as somewhat fixed objects and genres—at least in research dissemination (journal articles, project proposals, etc.). It seems important to acknowledge that there is this tension between current media theory concerning online spaces, intimacies and what we consider to be best methodological practices as it creates a number of ambivalences. When researching mediated intimacies, it is, therefore, important to ask ourselves: *how can we as researchers find ways to embrace and negotiate these ambivalences, and how can we add precision to the inconsistencies inherent to our fields of research?*

Developing methodological frameworks and methods that are more sensitive to capturing this shifting, processual understanding of mediated intimacies is not only a matter of developing good research practices. It is also necessary because these are topics at the forefront of many people’s everyday lives, including our own. This is particularly pertinent as social media spaces become increasingly commercialized and integrated into all aspects of daily life in the global North. As Catherine Driscoll and Melissa Gregg (2010) pointed out nearly a decade ago, “as academics and citizens of contemporary culture, we are already participants in online culture” (p. 16). Our own entanglements with mediated intimacies challenge the very nature of our expertise and academic authority, vividly illustrating the idea of “situated knowledges” (Haraway, 1991) while also providing us with new opportunities to reflect upon our research practices and methodologies in how we integrate our research subjects as well as ourselves. We need to take seriously that intimacy is an integrated part of online life, and that online life is an integrated part of doing research and that doing research can also be a practice of intimacy. Our hope is that these reflections will resonate with the readers of the journal, and we look forward to continuing the conversation.

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